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Article

## Contested Architecture: The ‘Woba’ Residential Colony in Basel, 1930

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### Abstract

In 1930, a housing exhibition called ‘Woba’ took place in the city of Basel. Unique for Switzerland, the commercial aspect of the furniture industry was complemented by a newly constructed residential colony. In accordance with discussions held one year before at the II CIAM congress in Frankfurt a. M., the *Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* was brought to life. Thirteen architectural offices experimented with different spatial designs in order to develop cheap and hygienic housing for the working class. For one month, some of the houses were open to the public. In the Swiss press, a vivid and controversial debate arose. On one side, its supporters advocated for standardized and rationalized housing as an appropriate way of living for modern individuals. On the other side, conservative forces saw a communist scheme at work in this housing in the style of *Neues Bauen*. By analyzing contemporary press articles on the Woba, this paper shows that the question of society’s future was being negotiated through architecture and furniture.

### Keywords

anti-communism; Baubolschewismus; Hans Schmidt; minimal housing; modern society; Neues Bauen; social engineering; sociology of architecture; Typenmöbel; Woba

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Housing Builds Cities”, edited by Luca Ortelli (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland), Chiara Monterumisi (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland) and Alessandro Porotto (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland).

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### 1. Introduction

We are on *Im Surinam*, a long, straight street in a flat-roofed residential area at the rear of a railway station on the outskirts of Basel. A lively scene unfolds in front of us. Walls are being repainted, furniture moved around, curtains installed—even an old electric Therma stove has been set up in the kitchen. Entering through the garden, we pass a small shed on the left, and find ourselves right in the middle of the kitchen as we step into the house. Doors lead to bathtub and laundry room, and the modestly furnished living room. It is surprisingly bright for a back-to-back house, even though there is only one large window in the living room. The two bedrooms and small toilet on the upper floor are equally flooded with light, illuminated from above by a carefully placed skylight. We search in vain for wall cupboards or storage space. There is just enough room for the essentials: a bed, a chair, a table, a cupboard. The house is small, very small. A 45-m<sup>2</sup>

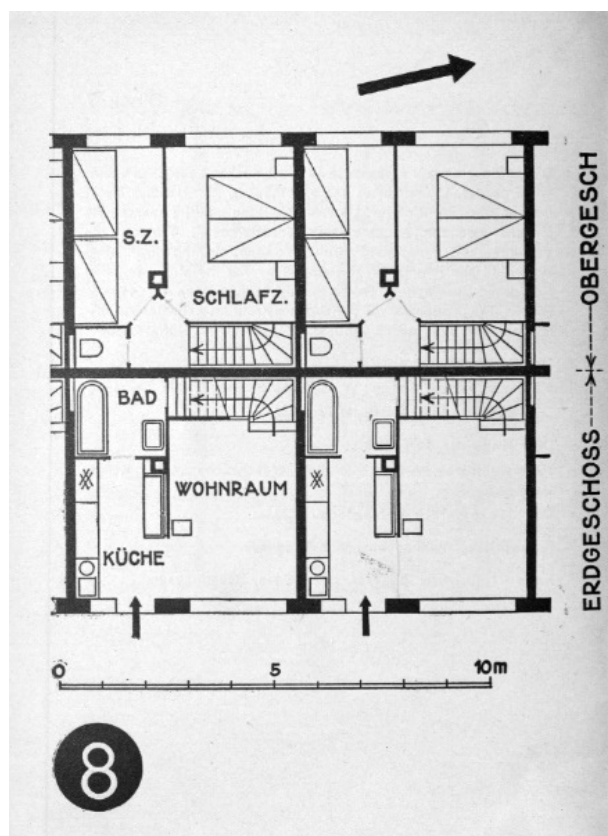
home for a family with two children, including a garden (Figures 1 and 2). It was built in 1930 by Paul Artaria and Hans Schmidt as part of a housing exhibition colony. Today it is inhabited again, and yet open to the public as a museum house, equipped with the original furniture ([www.ein-haus-woba.ch](http://www.ein-haus-woba.ch)).

The small size of this house is programmatic, a prototype for the “low-priced working-class apartment” (Baukommission der Schweizer Wohnungsausstellung Basel 1930, 1929, p. 1). Most working families of the late 1920s lived in poor conditions, crammed together in damp, narrow rooms with little light and ventilation. Hygienists and doctors voiced increasing concerns about such living conditions, and the pressing housing shortage after the First World War prompted a new generation of architects to design a new, better kind of home for the masses. The Eglise residential colony, which our house on *Im Surinam* is part of, is one of but a few of these projects which actually came to fruition in Switzerland.

Although the street's name evokes images of exotic lands in distant countries, and could give grounds for speculations about exoticizing the flat-roof settlement, the street was formerly called *Gotterbarmweg* and only re-named in 1941 (Schnetzler, 2005).



**Figure 1.** The 'Woba' Residential Colony Eglisee, 1930. Block 8, Artaria & Schmidt Architects. Bedroom, upper floor. Source: Spreng (1930).



**Figure 2.** Floor plan, block 8. Source: Woba (1930, p. 20).

Construction management for the Eglisee housing project was taken over by the Basel architect August Künzel, who had completed neighbouring cooperative housing projects together with Hans Bernoulli,

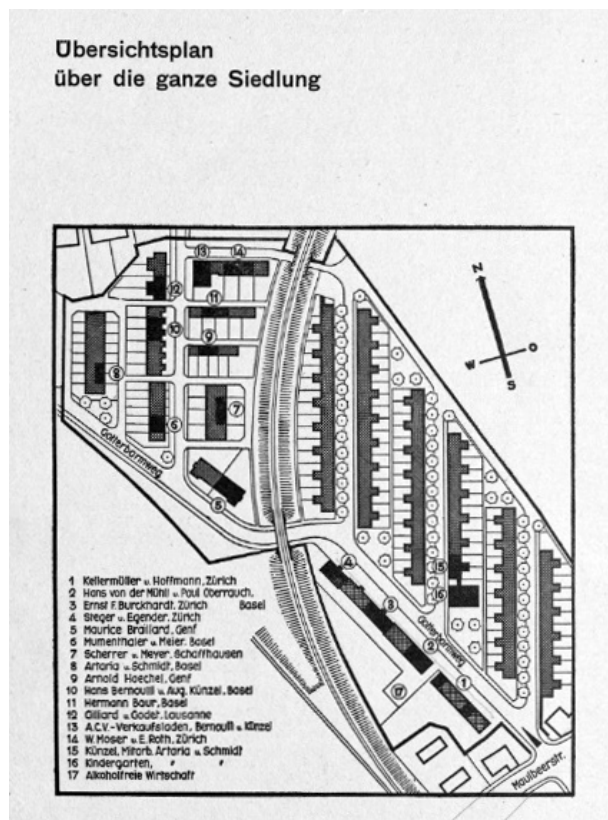
an important Basel-based architect and city planner. The realization of the Eglisee residential colony marked the endpoint of a larger urban development project of the *Hirzbrunnen* area on the outskirts of Basel (Mooser, 2000; Pola & Frischknecht, n.d.; Wohnbaugenossenschaften Nordwestschweiz, 2012). During the heyday of the cooperative housing movement in interwar Basel, around 250 houses were built in garden city fashion by Bernoulli and Künzel—all of them with steep roofs. It was only in 1928 when Hans Schmidt and Paul Artaria took over Hans Bernoulli's position as co-planners of the housing cooperative's *Lange Erlen* and *Rüttibrunnen* that the flat roof first appeared in Basel's residential areas (Figure 3; Artaria & Schmidt Architekten, 1928; Pläne der Wohngenossenschaften Lange Erlen, 1928).



**Figure 3.** Siedlung Schorenmaten, 1929, and Woba-Siedlung Eglisee, 1930 ("Siedlung Schorenmaten," 1930).

In comparison to the earlier cooperative housing projects, it is worth taking a closer look at the Eglisee settlement as a special case for two reasons. Firstly, the Eglisee residential colony was complemented by an apartment exhibition in the halls of the *Mustermesse Basel* called 'Woba', short for *Schweizerische Wohnungsausstellung Basel*, which, in addition to showcasing the latest trends in Swiss furniture design, also dealt with historical, statistical and scientific aspects of Swiss housing. Visitors were invited to compare completely furnished rooms tailored to the individual needs of the potential resident, such as the apartment for "The Time Conscious" or "The Growing Family". A makeshift Woba-Hotel, complete with restaurant, bar and a dancing hall, presenting the latest achievements in the hotel business was set up during the four weeks of the exhibition. Secondly, the designs of the permanent housing were considered as experimental and therefore developed by several Swiss architects. The idea was to compare different room layouts and examine their advantages and disadvantages. Thirteen architectural firms were invited to submit designs for an apartment building with three to four storeys, a two-storey single-family house, and a two-

family house (Figures 4 and 5). Basements for the houses were optional, the flat roof mandatory (Baukommission der Schweizer Wohnungsausstellung Basel 1930, 1929, p. 2). The apartment building was supposed to contain around 50 two or three-room apartments and the terraced houses about 70 flats, each with its own bathroom and laundry facilities. The total construction costs were not to exceed 15,000 Swiss francs (Baukommission der Schweizer Wohnungsausstellung Basel 1930, n.d., p. 2) because different housing solutions were wanted for low-income groups.



**Figure 4.** Situation plan of the Woba residential colony. Source: Woba (1930, p. 1).

The idea for the 'Woba' was first conceived in 1926 and envisioned as a commercially oriented exhibition that would highlight the dynamism of the Swiss furniture industry (Gruntz, 2016, 2017). The local government agreed to support such an exhibition, and invited Hermann Kienzle, Director of the *Gewerbemuseum* in Basel and representative of the *Schweizerischer Werkbund* (SWB) to draw up a concept. Kienzle's position quickly became clear. In accordance with SWB guidelines, he criticized the furniture industry, which above all, would produce cheaply produced items and decorate them with ornaments in order to sell a bookshelf to people who perhaps did not have more than four books. Kienzle thought that:

These new simple construction methods and rising manufacturing costs should go hand in hand with a

simplification of the furniture. For [artists and architects], furniture is not a showpiece, but a commodity. The comfort and homeliness of a room does not depend solely on the furniture or even on a single beautiful piece, but on the practical design and arrangement of a room....Today we know the problem of the new home is not merely an artistic one, but just as much a technical, economic and socio-ethical one. (Kienzle, 1926, pp. 3–4, 7–8.)



**Figure 5.** The 'WOBA' Residential Colony Eglise, 1930. Block 10, Hans Bernoulli, August Künzel. From the garden. Source: Ochs-Walde (1930).

A modern approach, Kienzle proposed, would require furniture to be exhibited in real living situations. By referring to the *Weissenhofsiedlung* by the *Deutscher Werkbund* (DWB) in Stuttgart, Kienzle concluded that an exhibition as proposed by the management of the *Mustermesse* could merely satisfy the commercial interests of the industry. If solutions for a modern form of housing and living were to be sought, then the exhibition at the *Mustermesse* would need to be supplemented by a real apartment, built especially for this purpose (Kienzle, 1926, p. 8). Thus, the idea of a residential colony was born.

## 2. International Context

The Eglise project should be placed in a larger context, where the exhibition in Stuttgart 1927 can be taken as a starting point. During the 1920s, in a series of exhibitions in Zurich's *Kunstgewerbemuseum*, the topic of adequate living and furnishing was introduced to the Swiss public. It was the exhibition *Das Neue Heim* (The new Home, in 1926), which laid the groundworks for Swiss involvement in the *Werkbundsiedlung* in Germany in 1927. The success of the Zurich exhibition prompted the DWB to invite a group of Swiss architects to design the furniture and interior of six apartments for Mies van der Rohe's house in Stuttgart in 1927 (Bürkle & Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, 1994). Based on *Weissenhof* in Stuttgart, further housing exhibition projects by national associations of craftsmen rapidly developed not only in Switzerland with



Eglisee and Neubühl (1928–1932), but in Brno (in 1928), Wrocław (in 1928), Prague (in 1932) and Vienna (in 1932). An important element seems to be the personal connection between the Swiss avant-garde and the project in Germany: seven of Eglisee's architects were part of the 1927 exhibition. Besides, the architecture collective for the Neubühl project in Zurich, which is far better known than the Eglisee housing colony due to Sigfried Giedion's active promotion in the international architecture scene (Marbach & Rüegg, 1990), was formed during the work on the Stuttgart exhibition. These architects, taking part in both projects, were at the forefront of the Swiss avant-garde and well connected with international modernist architects.

Swiss architects were also actively engaged in the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM). Since 1928, modernist architects had gathered at CIAM in order to find solutions for modern housing and city planning. Rudolf Steiger, Werner Max Moser and Hans Schmidt, who worked both on the Eglisee and Neubühl projects, were founding members of CIAM. The architects of various European countries gathering at CIAM thought of themselves as an international movement and sought to coordinate their efforts across national borders. The same year the Eglisee project took off, the II CIAM Congress entitled *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* took place in Frankfurt am Main. CIAM members discussed sociological and biological aspects of housing for the working poor and developed models on how to solve this construction task. As the experience of the Stuttgart exhibition has shown, concentrating merely on new construction methods and materials would not reduce the construction costs to a sufficient minimum. The solution would be the rationalization of the living space (Schmidt, 1930a). Therefore, a touring exhibition was opened in parallel with the congress, which exhibited floor plans of various housing in European cities, including our house *Im Surinam*, providing the public with feasible solutions. The exhibition also found its way to Basel in 1929. The 'Woba' was therefore the practical realization of a much-discussed theoretical problem among European avant-garde architects. This assumption is underlined by the fact that Basel architect Hans Schmidt (1893–1972), who presented a clear construction schedule for the Eglisee residential colony, played a crucial role both at CIAM and the 'Woba' (Steinmann, 1979, pp. 35–71). Schmidt was a pioneer of the so-called *Neues Bauen* in Switzerland, and, together with his office partner Paul Artaria, had been experimenting with various materials and construction methods for several years. Schmidt's basic idea for creating affordable housing for low-income groups was, in accordance with the CIAM conclusions, to concentrate on small living units. The smaller the flat, Schmidt contended, the lower its costs. Yet Schmidt and his colleagues did not simply seek to reduce the size of the standard flat, but to develop a completely new type of flat, an entirely new housing concept (Schmidt, 1965).

For modern architects, the problem of minimal apartments was not just a matter of design, but of social responsibility. The living unit—the *Ration 'Wohnung'*—was to satisfy the “minimal biological and sociological demands of the residents” (Schmidt, 1929, p. 51). “A more compact and at the same time more appropriate layout of the floor plan”, Schmidt argued, “changes in the use and size of rooms, and more sensible furnishings make the apartment cheaper without making it worse. On the contrary—saving space saves work” (Schmidt, n.d., p. 3). Typification, rationalization and standardization were key principles for the design of both flats and furniture. This was not just due to ideological or programmatic concerns, but had a practical dimension: conventional furniture was far too bulky for these small apartments. In a series of essays entitled “City and Apartment”, appearing in the *Basler National-Zeitung* between February and October 1930 on Schmidt's initiative, he stated as follows: “Are you shocked by the small size of the bedrooms? Please—we've abolished the washstand with marble top and divided the three-part mirror cabinet into two small type-cabinets” (Schmidt, 1930b). A new form of living also required a new kind of furniture.

Behind the discussion on minimal housing, the size of apartments and the right kind of furniture, a much larger discourse loomed. Divergent concepts of individuality, personality and family and especially of the role of women in family and household clashed in these debates. Below, I will show how the question of society's future form was being negotiated through architecture. These debates can be reconstructed from articles of over three hundred Swiss newspapers collected by the 'Woba' office between 1929 and 1930. As my analysis proves, the debates were not only influenced by the architects themselves, but discussed by the general public. These most vivid and emotional reactions to the 'Woba' residential colony reflect that through the questions of new housing concepts for the masses, political discussions and fears were being negotiated.

### 3. Housing is Political

The invention of type-furniture (*Typenmöbel*), a piece of furniture designed for serial production and versatile in its reduction to its basic function (Rüegg & Tropeano, 1995), proved key to the development of a new living concept: type-furniture as the embodiment of a modern way of living, because it gives an answer to the question of how to live in order to develop a new attitude to life. Modern individuals, as it was envisioned, no longer purchased a complete set of furniture at the beginning of their adult life, but instead supplemented it according to their needs and stage of life. Flexibility, lightness and effectiveness were the principles along which type-furniture was to be designed. Apartments would become lighter and less time-consuming, granting their residents more time for relaxation and self-development:

The practicality of the organization of the space and the form and nature of the furniture is suited to give the gainfully employed person, who in the haste of our work pace consumes himself more and faster, a greater measure of rest, relaxation and recreation, through the comfort provided by simple means and through the linear harmony [of the furniture's design], which has a calming effect on human beings. (St. Galler Tagblatt, 1930a)

The workers' newspaper *Das Volk* argued more militantly. It was the working class in particular which could benefit from the housing reform, as the author of this article writes. Because above all they were the ones suffering under modern production conditions and were increasingly exploited through "accelerated production speed" and "intensified rationalization" (Das Volk, 1930). The home as a space of leisure and recovery thus became an urgent issue in workers' class struggles:

In dull, grey, lightless tenements, in the midst of uncomfortable furniture that seeks to appear 'noble' by the poorest means: in such an environment self-confidence and proletarian power simply cannot unfold; this is the right milieu to force the worker into resignation, to hold him down in dullness and mental dependence. (Das Volk, 1930)

On the subject of furniture, the question of the appropriate contemporary, modern way of living was being negotiated—not just for the working class. Apartment and furniture were to be a unit, a complementary overall concept, tailored for the life of the modern individual in general. The development of new housing should be based on the furniture itself and not the other way around. Whereas type-furniture was considered as a gateway to modern life, the *petit bourgeois* household with its curtains, decorative blankets, vases and especially the parlour (*gute Stube*), in contrast, became an object of ridicule (Janser, 2001).

In the Swiss press discourse on the 'Woba', there was no agreement on whether the residential colony was a success, and whether it was the appropriate solution for future housing. Whereas *Das Volk* praised the plain design of the furnishings in particular because it would fit in well with the hard sobriety of a workers' life (Das Volk, 1930), an article in the newspaper *Der Bund* criticized the "mini-size apartment" (Der Bund, 1930). Is the Eglise residential colony really the only solution and should architects approach modern housing only from an economic point of view, it asks. The author's lamentation of the monochrome and monotonous colour palette and the lack of space for personal belongings, refers to two closely related discussions. The first touches the question of aesthetics and already gives an idea of the *Heimatstil* debate coming to its full height during the 1930s. It was less the flat roof, as one would expect, but rather the uniformity of these houses, the monotonous colour scheme

and the standardized doors and windows, which did not quite fit the Swiss landscape. "In the future, should these mundane buildings provide foreigners coming from the north with their first impressions of Switzerland?", asked a visiting journalist from the *Emmenthal*. "Our solid and beautiful architecture [Bauart] should not be replaced by this foreign living machine [Wohnmaschine], because our house is still our home" (A. V., 1930). This leads us to the second discussion, which took up much more space than the question of aesthetics. The author of the above-mentioned article in *Der Bund*, further stated: "Yet that is the family's sore spot. After all, what good is the cleanest living machine [Wohnmaschine] if the individual is not encouraged by being somewhat himself?" (Der Bund, 1930). The *St. Galler Tagblatt* went even further by stating that the houses' extreme, oppressive narrowness would ultimately lead to a breakdown of the family unit (St. Galler Tagblatt, 1930b). Marcel Pilet-Golaz, Member of the Federal Council and President of the Honorary Committee of the 'Woba', pointed right at it when he wrote in 1930:

The apartment—the home—is the foundation of family life, and is the family not the germ cell [Grundzelle] of human society? Society is nothing more than what families are, and families, in turn, are what women—honor where honor is due—and peoples' homes have made of them. (*Schweizer Gewerbezeitung*, 1930)

As these statements show, a strong connection has been made between the well-being of the family and society as a whole. The development of a person's individuality proved key to this concept. The home, and architecture in general, was thus attributed with a "constituent" quality: individuals were formed by their environment, by the milieu they live in. This semantic change was a specific feature of modernity, as Makropoulos (2003) describes it. Architecture was no longer thought of as having a representative function, but as a "constitutive medium of social reality" (Makropoulos, 2003, p. 577). The conservative voices in the Swiss press discourse were therefore worried that if this home, the "germ cell" of society, no longer grants people a sense of security, no longer educates them to individuality and personality, but promotes "egalitarianism"—understood as synonymous to collectivization in a socialist or communist sense—then the entire social fabric is at the risk of collapse:

If someone lets his individuality be completely replaced by 'class consciousness', he will lose the ability of making his own judgements....Whoever contemplates the complete egalitarianism which reigns both in the terraced houses and in the single-family houses here [in the Eglise colony], will almost inevitably feel the spiritual monotony, the lack of any personal feeling and experience, like a heavy burden on his conscience....Is there still the possibility of a family life in such an apartment?...*Cliché*-apartment, which will

have lost its homeliness after a short time of use! This is the ideal of the Marxist 'housing culture' [marxistische 'Wohnkultur'], the 'communal ideal', which finds its greatest impact in trade union and party....The unity of the family will be systematically destroyed and replaced by the communist ideal. These housing colonies provide the means for it. (Solothurner Zeitung, 1930)

The discussion in the press was fuelled by the article "Individualistische oder Sozialistische Wohnkultur?" appearing in mid-August 1930 in *Volksrecht*, a social democratic trade union newspaper. Its author rejected the idea of the garden city as a bourgeois dream of the villa in the park and instead called for the construction of residential complexes with public service features, concluding that, in the field of housing culture, the individualistic principle had to be gradually replaced by the socialist principle (*Volksrecht*, 1930). A different article took up this argument: "Today's question is: Individualistic or socialist housing ideal! Under the pretense of housing costs and housing comfort, the flattening of people's minds, and the depersonalization of the individual is being promoted". Socialists and "their comrades in arms, the communists" (G. H., 1930) would demand communal housing solutions to forge their political agenda. "As we can see, the question of housing culture should—according to the red brothers—be solved in such a way that the individual housing principle is being transformed into a collective, Marxist-socialist one by means of standardized furnishing". (G. H., 1930). He continues: "Some see it as the style to come, others as a work of Bolshevism that exploits the influence of buildings on people in the sense of depersonalization" (*Schweizerische Arbeitgeber-Zeitung*, 1930). The author of the article in the *Schweizer Gewerbe Zeitung* struck the same chord, but concluded that there is little to fear, as the brave Swiss housewife and daughter do not let themselves be "depersonalized" so easily (G. H., 1930).

The fact that women played an important role in the design of the family home was reflected in various press articles concerning the 'Woba'. The apartment exerts a decisive influence on women's character and emotions, one author contended (*Aargauer Tagblatt*, 1930). Particularly in discussions of the innovations of the "kitchen diner" (*Wohnküchen*) and rationalized small kitchen, the use of the housing reform for women was brought up. Financial hardship in working families leads to multiple burdens for women, it was observed: women would work for eight hours, and also have to do the chores when they come home:

This makes it all the more important that the workers' apartment is designed to be as labour-saving as possible: the woman should not devote all her free time to housework, but should instead be able to relax or at least find time for her children. In other words: small and simple furniture that does not cause much

work, a small kitchen, a dining room in very close proximity to the kitchen, in order to prevent excessive walking around but still to avoid living in the kitchen (which is not a living room, but a working room). (Das Volk, 1930)

Another article focuses on the aspect of housework as work in particular. Since the housewife considers her work to be her profession, her workplace must be designed according to the principles of rationalization. Basically, kitchen work can also represent a "production line", in which the "tools" are arranged practically in the smallest space so that the work can be carried out "as effortlessly and quickly" as possible (*Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten*, 1930). The idea of *Taylorization* and rationalization had left the factories and entered the private home. Surprisingly, the press coverage did not refer to the famous *Frankfurter Küche* invented by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1926. Rather, it referred to the exhibition in the *Gewerbemuseum* in Basel earlier the year on the "the practical kitchen" (*Die praktische Küche*, February and March 1930) and the SAFFA exhibition on women's work in 1928. In one article, the author highlights the fact that despite the construction law of Basel, which does not allow rooms smaller than eight square meters, rationalized standard kitchens were being installed in the 'Woba' houses. This refers to an often-overlooked aspect prominently discussed at the II CIAM congress. The main obstacles for the realization of minimized and standardized houses were the outdated construction laws, which did not keep up with the new construction possibilities. That is why much effort was put into this rather dry technical aspect. Schmidt argued in several articles that the task of creating the new "rational minimal housing" (*rationelle Kleinwohnung*) could only be solved in a cost-effective way if existing construction laws and standards were amended (Schmidt, 1929).

The article "Marriage Avoidance and Housing Reform" (*Eheflucht und Wohnungsreform*), written by the 'Woba' press committee itself, built on the earlier argument by Pilet-Golaz. As the title implies, "marriage avoidance" was a legitimate point of consideration in the design of the modern living unit. Many women, especially the "so-called 'modern' ones...choose the freedom of living alone" over marriage, which, as the author stated, was not to be blamed on women alone, because:

Today's marriage asks too much of the woman. She ought to be a homemaker, possibly a mother and—since the costs of living require it—also working at the same time. Is such versatility ever required of a man? No. He is an earner—outside the home—but an earner only. He does not have to split his powers into a thousand things. (*Eheflucht und Wohnungsreform*, n.d., p. 1)

If marriage is to become more appealing to women again, then housing must be simplified. Superfluous things

like the parlour should be abolished, dust-collecting ornaments replaced by smooth surfaces, and a practical small kitchen should be provided for quick cooking. All in all, a small apartment would reduce the amount of work, and thus have a positive effect on married life in particular. “The new way of living does not know a worn-out woman; a worn-out woman is always in a bad mood, she does not tie a man to herself” (Eheflucht und Wohnungsreform, n.d., p. 2). Although the article sounds rather progressive, there was no discussion about freeing women from housework. Rather the opposite was intended: a woman’s place is in the kitchen, even if it is a rationalized and standardized one. That is where she should carry out her civic duty and contribute efficiently to the stability of modern society—by providing families with functional homes.

As shown, various discourses can be tracked down in the Swiss press coverage of the ‘Woba’ and they all lead to the question of the form, nature and needs of modern society. On one side stood the idea of the unity of state, family and nation, on the other the unity of party, community and class. The will to reshape society through architecture and interior design expressed by the supporters of *Neues Bauen* was a provocation to many, who saw a communist scheme at work in their efforts at standardization, rationalization and minimization. In his programmatic article *Das Bauen ist nicht Architektur* published in 1927, Hans Schmidt had already proclaimed that building was no longer to be art, but a social task waiting for a solution (Schmidt, 1927, p. 139). *ABC Beiträge zum Bauen*, a Swiss avant-garde architecture magazine co-edited by Schmidt, was framed by the two slogans “ABC demands the dictatorship of the machine” and “ABC fights against the bourgeois era” (Schmidt, Stam, Lissitzky, & Roth, 1927, pp. 1, 12). To Schmidt, the question was not what kind of house was built, but rather, what kind of society. Conservative forces accusing *Neues Bauen* and the political left of “egalitarianism” had correctly identified their opponents’ goal: the break-up of the existing order and the creation of a new society. The little man, the worker, men and women—that was the future. Class differences were to be overcome in favour of social justice.

Indeed, the leftist architectural modernists were looking eastwards to achieve this goal. At the same time in Soviet Russia, far more extreme proposals were discussed than in Switzerland. The idea of the *dom kommuny*, the so-called communal houses intended to accustom people to a collectivized life, were starting to be built by the end of the 1920s. The most famous example was the so-called Narkomfin communal building. The architectural structure of the house and the spatial design was supposed to encourage its inhabitants to become accustomed to a collectivized lifestyle by providing them with a communal kitchen, laundry and a nursery, where their children lived and were brought up by professionals. The complex also included a library and sports hall for the New Man’s physical and mental cultivation (Buchli, 2000; Cramer & Zalivako 2013). Because of Soviet

Russia’s pioneering task, the IV CIAM Congress was to take place in Moscow in 1932. Due to the outcome of the competition for the Palace of the Soviets, in which a classicist building won first place, the congress was postponed and instead held one year later on a cruise ship on its way to Athens. This event was a huge disappointment for the international modern avant-garde and made clear in which direction Soviet Russia was heading as a result of Stalinist cultural revolution.

At the end of the ‘Woba’, Hans Schmidt published an article with the title *Arbeiterwohnungen* (Schmidt, 1930c) in the communist-oriented newspaper *Basler Vorwärts*. Schmidt expressed an extremely critical attitude towards the ‘Woba’ and drew a gloomy conclusion. The problem of workers’ housing, Schmidt wrote, were of the same kind as other problems that one tried to solve “on the ground of today’s order”. “As long as the workers’ apartment remains the ‘workers’ apartment”, Schmidt argued, “and not the apartment for everyone, all efforts in this area will be in vain”. The housing question should be understood as an “expression of general necessity” and should therefore be given top priority. The dream of a small detached house was a *petit bourgeois* ideal, not a worker’s ideal, and the entire housing question continues to be solved without the worker in mind. “One won’t stop solving the housing question of the worker in a petty bourgeois sense until one really makes an effort to know what the modern worker actually needs for living” (Schmidt, 1930c). If conservative forces asserted that a Russian worker’s living standard was not even close to the one of a Swiss worker, they should bear in mind that Russia had “acknowledged the task of creating appropriate living and working conditions for an entire society by the means of a systematic approach” (Schmidt, 1930c). By the time Hans Schmidt published these reflections, he already knew that in no less than four weeks he and his family would move to the Soviet Union. Schmidt was not the only one who tried his luck in the East. With the beginning of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928, the Soviet Union engaged many foreign specialists to master the task (Flierl, 2012; Muscheler, 2016; Suter, 1993).

Schmidt and his colleagues were convinced they could change workers living conditions by providing them with good housing. Their self-understanding was very much tailored by a top down perspective on society’s problems, a phenomenon described as “social engineering” (Etzemüller, 2009). Etzemüller highlights that exactly this fetishization of order through standardization and rationalization served as metaphors for a functioning society. It was not only a matter that was addressed by the social planning experts, but also discussed broadly and controversially in the general public.

#### 4. Conclusions

During the ‘Woba’, socio-political discourses gained concrete shape in the form of the housing question. On the



one hand, there was the left architectural avant-garde, who conceived of their construction program as a social necessity. On the other hand stood conservative forces, who perceived this kind of architecture as a threat to the social order. The *Heimatstil* debate and the question of *Baubolschewismus*, which shaped the reception of this project, had already been underway previously, as much as the *Neues Bauen* (Dogramaci, 2019; Kohlrausch, 2019), influenced by developments in neighboring countries. Despite claims to a greater international outlook, the German scene remained the main point of reference for Switzerland's architectural avant-garde, and developments in other countries received comparatively little attention (Kuchenbuch, 2010; Rudberg, 1999).

Taking cues from abroad, the Swiss discourse on *Neues Bauen* also spilled over the borders of the federation. The pamphlet "The Architecture Crisis" (*Krisis der Architektur*), published in 1928 by Swiss architect Alexander von Senger (1928), proved foundational for the introduction of racist notions into the international discussion on *Neues Bauen*. With this publication, Von Senger, who regarded the movement as disguised communist propaganda controlled by Moscow, popularized the term *Baubolschewismus*—bolshevism by architecture (Blümm, 2013, p. 25)—which later gained notoriety especially in Nazi Germany. Racist notions soon also became pervasive in Switzerland itself—not least at the 'Woba', which Marcel Pilet-Golaz opened with a passionate speech praising "will, drive and endurance" as inherent qualities of the Swiss people, which prevailed despite war and political upheavals. "These are racial characteristics [Rassenmerkmale]!", Pilet-Golaz declared, "thanks to them there's hope, and through them we will succeed" (Schweizer Freie Presse, 1930).

The discussions that surrounded *Neues Bauen* in Switzerland, for example on the occasion of the competition for the Kunstmuseum Basel (Birkner, 1995, p. 22; Heim, 2016) and the exhibition in the Werkbundsiedlung Neubühl in 1932 (Marbach & Rüegg, 1990, p. 46), have so far been studied exclusively as specialist discourses within architectural circles (Schnell, 2005). Yet, *Neues Bauen* resonated far beyond the architectural scene, evoking strong reactions from all sides of the political spectrum. In 1930, the year the 'Woba' took place, political radicalization in Switzerland and all of Europe had intensified sharply. The political left was deeply fractured, the conservatives unwilling to give up their positions and, in addition to the fear of the 'red plague', National Socialism and Italian fascism gained more and more adherents. My analysis of press coverage on the 'Woba' has shown that the discussion of the architecture and interior design of the Eglise residential colony was inseparable from such larger social conflicts. The question of what the apartment of the future should look like was closely tied to the question of where the future society should be heading towards. The polarized reception of the 'Woba' reflected the increasingly fractured state of society itself.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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